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ABSTRACT

This paper examined each of the eight major recommendations of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's 1989 report entitled "Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century." That report called for the transformation of early adolescent education by: (1) creating a community for learning in the schools through increased interaction between teachers, parents, and students; (2) teaching a core of common knowledge and ethics; (3) ensuring success for all students by expanding learning opportunities for students at all levels; (4) empowering teachers, administrators, and parent groups; (5) preparing teachers specifically for the middle grades; (6) improving academic performance through improving students' health and fitness; (7) reengaging families in the education of their children; and (8) connecting schools with the communities they serve. The paper places particular emphasis on the role that families can play in each of these areas. It is suggested that middle-grade schools can reengage families by offering parents meaningful roles in school governance, by keeping parents informed, and by offering families opportunities to support the learning process at home and at school. Ten schools in Arkansas received grants to implement the Carnegie Council's eight recommendations. A number of proposals by the Arkansas State Department of Education to implement a middle grade assessment program in that state's schools are discussed. (MDM)

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Reengaging Families in the Education of Young Adolescents

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Abstract

Reengaging Families in the Education of Young Adolescents

For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future (Turning Points, 1989).

The Carnegie Corporation of New York established the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1986 to place the challenges of the adolescent years higher on the nation's agenda. In 1987, as its first major commitment, the Council established the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents. Drawing from education, research, government, health, and the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, the Task Force commissioned papers, interviewed experts in relevant fields, and met with teachers, principals, health professionals, and leaders of youth-serving community organizations. It examined, first-hand, promising new approaches to fostering the education and healthy development of young adolescents.

Reengaging Families in the Education of Young Adolescents

The Carnegie Council Task Force report, Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century,(1989), reinforces an emerging movement, still relatively unrecognized by policy makers, to build support for and educate young adolescents through new relationships between schools, **families**, and health and **community** institutions.

This presentation will look at each of eight recommendations found in Turning Points. Recommendation seven specifically discusses the importance of reengaging the family in the education of early adolescence, but the family, in the opinion of this presenter, is critical to each of the recommendations and this report will highlight the role of families in each of the recommendations.

By age 15, substantial numbers of American youth are at risk of reaching adulthood unable to meet adequately the requirements of the workplace, the commitments of relationships in families and with friends, and the responsibilities of participation in a democratic society.

Young people face unprecedented choices and pressures at the very time the guidance they need as adolescents is withdrawn. No longer seen as children, but not yet able to function as adults, struggling to created their own identities and break away from the guidance of adults, many young people feel a desperate sense of isolation.

In our changed America, the sense of community that once existed in urban neighborhoods and was the hallmark of most rural towns has eroded. Stable, close-knit communities where people know and look out for each other are far less common than they were a generation or two ago. The economy continues to plague families. The unskilled can find only low-paying work and many families struggle to maintain their standard of living. In most two parent families, both parents must work. Often, this struggle means a sacrifice of time with family members. Family structures have changed dramatically, as both divorce and single-parent households are far more common than a decade ago. A single parent may need to hold down two jobs. Families and individuals move frequently to find jobs, affordable housing, or other opportunities. The workplace has changed, as more women work outside the home and people switch jobs more often. Whole industries have disappeared in recent months and years. The numbers of homeless families has increased to the point that they can be found in nearly community. Even in relatively financially stable homes, few families sit down together for even one meal a day. Each family member has a separate agenda and is less and less dependent upon the family for their social needs.

The conditions of early adolescence have changed dramatically from previous generations. Today, young people enter a society that at once denounces and glorifies sexual promiscuity and the use of illicit drugs. Seriously delinquent activities rise during early adolescence and peak at age 15 (Dusek, 1987). More and more teenagers below the age of 16 are becoming sexually active (Hofferth et. al., 1987).

They live in urban neighborhoods and even in some rural towns where the stability of close-knit relationships is rare, where the sense of community that shapes their identity has eroded. Between 1980 and 1985, the suicide rate more than doubled for 10-to-14-year-olds (Waller et.al., 1989).

In these changed times, and facing unprecedented choices and pressures, the adult guidance they needed as children and need no less as adolescents is very often absent. Many parents, seeing that their child is developing physically into an adult's body, mistake the stirring of independent thinking for the capacity to make adult decisions. The frustration of a developing identity is a major task for adolescents and one which is often not without strained relationships with those whose support they need most. Parents do not realize that their child's needs for autonomy are not a rejection of family bonds, nor do they require the rejection of their family. What is needed is a realignment of roles and relationships with the family.

The young adolescent is moving from dependency to interdependency with parents, as well as with friends, relatives, and other persons outside the home. While renegotiating relationships with parents and other care-givers, often in outwardly stormy ways, the young person simultaneously seeks to maintain strong ties with exactly those people.

Freed from the dependency of childhood, but not yet able to find their own path to adulthood, many young people feel a desperate sense of isolation and frustration. The desire to reduce dependence upon parents occurs at a time when peer relationships are often in a state of flux. Your best friend one day is eating lunch the

next day with someone else. Peer relationships are fairly superficial and nonsupportive. Surrounded only by their equally confused peers, too many make poor decisions with harmful or lethal consequences. Adolescents' tendency to become involved in numerous male-female relationships is at least partially a response to the need for a sense of significance and support from significant adults in their lives. These adults may be their parent(s), teacher(s) or even the parents who are visible in the schools serving as role models. It is interesting to note that many of these parents do not necessarily see themselves as role models.

Unfortunately, middle grade schools, however named, - junior high, intermediate, and middle schools - are potentially society's most powerful force to make a difference to millions of youth who are barely surviving physically, socially, emotionally and academically. These schools can also help even those whose needs are not as evident to thrive during early adolescence. Sadly, all too often these schools exacerbate the problems of young adolescents. A critical mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents (Turning Points, p.32_). In truth, many middle grade schools are more concerned with the state curriculum guides and pay little attention to the families of the students, and thus, to the total student. Students who are hungry, sick, troubled, or depressed cannot function well in the classroom, no matter how good the school.

As our youth begin falling by the wayside, and as the market diminishes for uneducated or undereducated persons, we face the specter of a divided society: one

affluent and well-educated, the other poorer and ill-educated. An ever complicated world requires a well-adjusted populace prepared for higher level thinking.

TRANSFORMING THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Many middle grade schools today fall far short of meeting the critical educational, health, and social needs of millions of young adolescents. Many youth now leave the middle grades unprepared for what lies ahead of them. A fundamental transformation of the education of young adolescents is urgently required and to move us in new directions, The Carnegie Task Force has identified eight recommendation for creating the Model Middle School.

The first of the eight recommendations calls for:

1) 1 CREATING A COMMUNITY FOR LEARNING *School should be a place where close, trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for students' personal growth and intellectual development. The key elements of these communities are schools-within-schools or houses, students and teachers grouped together as teams, and small group advisories that ensure that every student is know well by one adult.*

Many large middle grade schools function as mills that contain and process endless streams of students. Within them are masses of anonymous youth. Such settings virtually guarantee that the intellectual and emotional needs of youth will go unmet (Turning Points, p. 37).

Each of the Carnegie Demonstration Sites in Arkansas are creating teams of teachers, students, and often parents, who work together to achieve

academic and personal goals for students. Teachers share responsibility for the same students and can solve problems together, before they reach the crisis stage; teachers report (Arkansas State Department of Education Carnegie Summary Report, 1991) that classroom discipline problems are dramatically reduced through teaming. Even **the presence of an adult, other than the teacher, in the classroom or building helps to reduce behavior problems**. Teaming provides an environment conducive to learning by reducing the stress of anonymity and isolation of students. When a student needs to talk, even if the surface level is "small talk" the parent helper is often the one to whom students will turn. They are often given some small amounts of training in listening and are not encouraged to give advice, but to act as a sounding board as students work through their own confusion or isolation. The teaming has been facilitated differently by different schools. All, teachers and parents, have had in-service workshops which are scheduled on a monthly basis, in some cases, to teach the teaming process. Most began their programs as early as last spring and continued through the summer.

These Interdisciplinary Teams also provide a much needed support group for the teachers themselves, eliminating the isolation teachers can experience in departmentalized settings. Morale among teachers often increases significantly with team teaching even though some teachers find it difficult to know how to work with others in the beginning. Parent volunteer groups are popular in some districts. In one instances the parents took classes while teachers worked with students on a school

program. At another school program the students, with the support of parents, were responsible for the costumes, props, staging backdrops, etc.

2) **TEACHING A CORE OF COMMON KNOWLEDGE.** *Every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge, lead a healthy life, behave ethically and lawfully and assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society.*

Teaching young adolescents to be active citizens should include youth service - supervised activity helping others in the community or the school - in its core instructional program. Youth service can teach young people about values for full participation in this society. **Service opportunities abound within the community and many parents are excellent potential resources**. Parents are often in a position to help organize and supervise community projects.

Appreciation of cultural diversity, application of equal opportunity practices, and sensitivity to ethnic and racial pluralism within the community should be reflected in the composition of the school staff, and should take into consideration the role models available from the parents of minority students.

3) **ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS.** *All young adolescents should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grade program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn.*

Classes are being scheduled to provide for flexible scheduling to accommodate an integrated curriculum and joint planning by teachers. Teacher teams are able to

create block of instructional time to best meet the needs of students, rather than tailoring learning to fit a rigid schedule.

Expanded opportunities for learning are being achieved by **extending the school day through programs after school or working with existing programs offered by Boys Clubs, 4-H, scouting etc.** Specialized after school tutoring programs are also being used and include not only the students, but their parents as well as parents attempt to learn how they can help their children. **Greater involvement of the home in learning activities is a critical element in the new middle schools**. Parents are responsible for helping prepare "homework" materials designed to help the parent better know how to help their children. In some instances, the parents may be resource persons or their contribution may be limited to cutting, and laminating.

As long as the math homework is limited to one-plus-one most parents are comfortable. Many parents will admit that a part of their reluctance to work with their children, and beginning of their personal estrangement, is their own lack of academic background. Parent workshops are also designed to help parents know how to help their children. In some cases it is just a matter of showing an interest in their school day and their lessons.

4) EMPOWERING TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS. *Decisions concerning the experiences of middle grade students should be made by the adults who know them best.*

Teachers and administrators at all levels of elementary and secondary education, including the middle grades, are, typically, limited in their authority to make decisions regarding their own practices. Teachers need to have the opportunity to take responsibility for what is taught and how if real classroom improvement is to be seen.

In many of the demonstration sites teachers are being given common planning time during the school day to make these decisions, to discuss shared students, and to seek counsel from colleagues and parents or parent groups. With the support and advice of parent advisory committees, they are determining instructional methods and materials for classroom use, identifying and developing interdisciplinary curricular themes, and selecting field experiences, including youth service opportunities. In some of the schools, teachers and parent advisory groups have a visible and significant role in the interviewing and hiring of new teachers.

Those schools with such building governance committees usually begin by using the same persons who were a part of the MGAP teams. These committees enable teachers, students, administrators, support staff, parents, and representatives from community organizations to coordinate and integrate all activities that occur within the school building and between school and community organization. The process of shared decision making can promote trust, respect, and a community of purpose essential for learning. Some districts had, to some degree, shut the parents out and considered them to be a part of the problem and not a resource for solutions. One such district, has had a recent history of disruptive behavior and even violence

with students being shot. Two male administrators, one black the other white, had failed in stopping the violence. Recently, a female administrator was hired and her own life threatened. Consideration was being given to hiring armed, off-duty police officers, as security guards. This past week, February 11, the members of the School Board voted unanimously to try using community volunteers for security patrols before hiring guards. With more than 500 disciplinary problems reported since school started, including a student shot earlier in the year, getting more parents into that building and involved is a first step in cleaning up the campus.

Empowering teachers and parent groups will require training as they learn to work together. Administrators are also going to need some in-service on site-based management to learn new role responsibilities.

5) **PREPARING TEACHERS FOR THE MIDDLE GRADES.** *Teachers in middle grade schools should be selected and specially educated to teach young adolescents.*

Teachers will need preparation in working with families: one-parent and two-parent families, families of various ethnic backgrounds and races, and families undergoing economic or other stress that may influence their children's performance in school.

Very often, teachers are unaware of the problems and stressors going on in the lives of the students and their families.

6) IMPROVING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE THROUGH BETTER HEALTH AND FITNESS. *Young adolescents must be healthy in order to learn.*

Good health does not guarantee that students will be interested in learning, but ample evidence suggests that poor health lowers students' academic performance. Because of the link between health and school success, middle grade schools must ensure the accessibility of health and counseling services and function as health-promoting environments. Drug and alcohol use increasingly begins in the middle grades. Kandel, (1985), is concerned with the fact that so many youth are involved with drugs and alcohol at such young ages because of compelling evidence that drug use in early adolescence is a critical factor in long-term substance abuse. Youth who turn to these substances need immediate access to professional counseling and treatment. Many school districts have counseling programs available through the Departments of Health and Human Services which are designed for both the students and their parents. Students who have been suspended for use drugs and alcohol are required to attend these sessions with their parent(s) or guardians.

7) **REENGAGING FAMILIES IN THE EDUCATION.** *Families and middle grade schools must be allied through trust and respect if young adolescents are to succeed in school.*

Recommendations seven and eight were cited as most critical to the success of their school programs by twenty-five districts taking part in a middle-level education workshop January 30, 1992.

Despite the clearly documented benefits of parental involvement for students' achievement and attitudes toward school, parental involvement of all types declines progressively during the elementary school years. By middle grade school, the home-

school connection has been significantly reduced, and in some cases is nonexistent. (Epstein, 1986). The widening gulf between families and schools during the middle grade years reflects many parents' belief that they should increasingly disengage from their young adolescents. In the belief that adolescents should be independent, parents come to view involvement in their child's education as unnecessary. While young adolescents need greater autonomy, however, they neither need nor desire a complete break with parents and other family members.

As was stated earlier, many middle grade schools do not encourage, and some actively discourage, parent involvement at school. Particularly in low-income and minority neighborhoods, parents are often considered to be part of the problem of educating young adolescents rather than an important potential educational resource. Many parents in such communities, after assessing their own poor relations with their young adolescent's teachers and recalling their own painful memories of the classroom, become deeply alienated from their young adolescent's school. Parental involvement, while a recommendation by itself, is critical to each of the other seven as may be apparent by the degree to which parental involvement has been already addressed in each of the first six. Reversing the downward slide in parent involvement and closing the gulf between parents and school staff with mutual trust and respect are crucial for the successful education of adolescents. Middle grade schools can reengage families by:

a.) Offering parents meaningful roles in school governance;

b.) Keeping parents informed; and

c.) Offering families opportunities to support the learning process at home and at school.

In an America of small towns and close-knit neighborhoods, schools were a natural part of the community, and trust and respect between schools and families came more readily. Schools today need to reach out to offer families meaningful roles in their child's education and in the life of the school. One method of reaching out to parents and involving them in the education of their young adolescents is to ask them to serve on school-wide building governance committees.

The building governance committee affords parents a meaningful opportunity to help define the mission of the school and to join in the decision making process concerning building-wide issues and problems. The role of parents in defining building-level goals and supporting the school's overall program must be carefully defined and complement rather than conflict with school staff's role in developing the academic program. Yet no middle grade school can successfully serve youth and the community if families do not agree with the school's goals and reinforce them at home.

Parents involved in planning the work of the school feel powerful, develop confidence, and are more likely to attend school activities, which signals the importance of school to their young adolescents. Parents on school-wide governance committees who work effectively and cooperatively with school staff become models of such behavior for their young adolescents and other students.

It is important for young adolescents to see their parents as effective people and as decision makers, as people who are concerned about them and who work and act on their behalf. The only place where many young people, particularly in low-income communities, see their parents in important roles is in the school or the church. Even if students do not see their own parents in meaningful roles in school, they benefit from seeing parents of other children in those roles. Parental involvement also has the potential to create trust and respect between parents and school staff; as students observe that trust, they begin to trust school staff as well.

Parent-Teacher Organizations with genuine responsibility for elements of the school program represent another important way in which schools can reach out to involve parents. These organizations can be particularly important in offering parents opportunities to decide what they need to know about early adolescence. In our country, much of parent-adolescent relations involves uncharted waters. Parent-Teacher Associations and Parent-Teacher Organizations can enable parents to find out from others like themselves what "normal" means for this age group. Strong parent organizations can initiate workshops or classes on parenting skills or teach parents how to tutor or monitor their children in specific subjects.

Middle level education with its use of teams, advisor-advisee groups, teacher empowerment, etc. requires training. Many of the districts who are receiving training have invited the community to these workshops. These workshops not only inform parents and community members about the new curricular approaches, but also offers them an opportunity to contribute their own ideas and ask questions. Some districts

had a backlash when some community members have misinterpreted the role of advisor-advisee groups. Others have had problems with parents understanding the move away from tracking (high and low academic groups) students or the benefits of intramural sports versus competitive athletics. Hands-on activities directly related to units of academic study are being provided with directions for parents on how to help their children with these assignments meant to be completed at home with the support of their parent(s). Upon completion of the assigned supplementary activities, the students would report their "findings" to classmates and receive merit badges or appropriate recognitions. Essentially, they would be extending their school day into the home and community.

Keeping parents informed requires direct communication between middle grade schools and parents and can be one of the most effective means of establishing trust, and for easing students' transition from elementary to middle grades. Communication between home and school should begin well before the first day of school. To ease the transition, middle grade teachers and administrators can contact parents early and consistently. The traditional open house held several weeks into the youth's first semester comes too late and may attract few parents. Parents need to know how the middle grade school operates, what rules and procedures students should anticipate. Moreover, families need to know before their child enters middle grade school that they are respected and play a central role in the school program.

Schools can promote trust, collaboration, and communication by assigning each student an advisor who meets and comes to know the youth's family over the

entire period of enrollments sends a clear signal that the school considers strong linkages with home vital.

Schools recognize that significant effort is necessary to establish good working relations because many parents sense that they have no meaningful role in their children's education or in the school.

Teachers have begun designing home-learning activities that draw on parents' strengths. For instance, written assignments based on interviews with parents about events that took place during their childhood can bring history alive for the student. Assignments for which young people ask their parents' opinion on current world affairs or issues of the neighborhood can offer students different perspectives on their own studies.

Parents, grandparents, and other adults can also play useful roles in daily school life. Those with particular interests and expertise can serve as classroom resources for presentations and as a source of support materials.

8) CONNECTING SCHOOLS WITH COMMUNITIES. *Responsibility for each middle grade student's success should be shared by schools and community organization.*

Many persons other than families have strong influences upon the success and failure of bond issues. Old, influential families or business groups can influence the direction of school curriculums and programs. Resources from the non-profit and private sectors, the health-care professions, and other institutions can add intangible and invaluable dimensions to the educational process.

Schools are making plans to *provide opportunities for youth service.* Public libraries, settlement houses, churches, youth-serving organizations, and other agencies offer places to study, tutors, homework clinics, and homework hotlines. Parents are often in key positions to assist in bringing the community to the students.

Community relations and family support are vital to all schools and are recognized as the top priorities as Arkansas schools begin working toward establishing good middle level educational programs. By these initial restructuring efforts each district will become more closely linked to its individual community. To see that the eight recommendations didn't just lie on a shelf collecting dust, the Carnegie Institute created grants for ten states interested in developing demonstration site schools which would incorporate the eight recommendations of the Task Force. With forty-two states making application, Arkansas was one of twenty-seven states receiving an initial start-up grant. Within the state, twenty-eight districts submitted proposals with an eye on being selected as a demonstration site. Ten schools were selected for the start-up grant and Arkansas is one of ten states to receive a continuation grant. The current plan is for the ten original schools to form partnerships with additional districts as they complete in-service training and move into the unique middle-school approaches to curriculums.

The Arkansas Education Renewal Consortium, a member of Goodlad's National Network for Educational Renewal, has received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation which provides for twenty-five schools to administer the MGAP assessment and to implement the eight recommendations established in Turning Points. The first

meeting of this group took place January 30, 1992, and as of this date has begun the assessment training for twelve of the twenty-five districts.

It is understood that each school is unique, as are all middle schools, and that no two are ever exactly the same. In this instance the unifying force is the attempt to meet each of the eight recommendations.

MIDDLE GRADE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (MGAP)

The Arkansas proposals include a number of unique features. Recognizing that school districts may not always be the best judge of what needs changing and how to go about it, the Arkansas proposals included outside consultants. Each district participating in the Carnegie Grant was asked to select one consultant from a list developed by the Governor's Middle Level Policy and Practice Task Force. The Rockefeller Grantees were assigned consultants with the recommendation the Arkansas State Department of Education. The State Department person responsible for the Governors' Middle School Initiative had the primary responsibility for those selections.

Recognizing that the training and experience of consultants was bound to be as varied as the districts they were serving, the Arkansas State Department of Education contracted with the North Carolina Center for Early Adolescence to train faculty, administration and their Carnegie Consultants in a Middle Grade Assessment Program (MGAP). The MGAP training took place over a three-day period in January 1991 and looked at the development of assessment teams which would consist of teachers, administrators, students, parents and community members. The Rockefeller Middle

Grades Project is also using the Middle Grades Assessment Program developed by the University of North Carolina Center for Early Adolescence, but is using Arkansans who've had the training. As has been mentioned, this training has already begun for several of the new school districts.

The Middle Grade Assessment provides the first step in bringing the community into the planning for the new middle school programs. In each case, **the assessment process included** interviews of administrators, teachers, school staff, students, **parents** and community members. The interview were conducted by consultants, teachers and parents. Classroom observations were made, often by the grant consultant to bring an objective outside view, with the results being communicated to the school board and the community. The assessment process for the first ten schools in 1991 was an experience in and of itself. The Bryant School District didn't have a middle grade program and started from scratch, while Old High in Bentonville had been working diligently at developing an ideal middle school for some five years. Other districts were somewhere in between and each had its own problems and potentials. Physical plant, concerned parents, traditionalist administrations and a myriad other areas surfaced as problems to be resolved.

The process is still unfolding and schools are continuing toward each of the eight recommendations. The first rule is to learn to walk before you run. No school will be able to incorporate each of the recommendations overnight. The important consideration is to have a long-range plan which will see most of the following

recommendations in place three to five years from now. An important component of that plan requires reengaging families in the education of young adolescents.

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